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From Canvas to Paper; from Shutter to Pen:

Exploring Ekphrasis through the Poetry of Natasha Trethewey.

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Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper analyzes a selection of Natasha Trethewey's ekphrastic poems inspired by both photographs and paintings. The specific nature of each medium offers the possibility to approach ekphrasis from different perspectives, so the examination of the way in which the ekphrastic process is affected by the intrinsic nature of each art constitutes one of the aims that are meant be fulfilled. The importance of contrasting the ekphrastic text with its visual referent is also called into question, becoming the assessment of its (ir)relevance another objective to pursue. The stylistic analysis of the poems will be performed bearing in mind one of the key concepts in cognitive poetics: the figure-ground phenomenon, allowing the evaluation of the suitability of figure-ground dynamics to make sense of the ekphrastic text. Finally, an analysis of the specific uses that the poet devotes to ekphrasis will also be performed.

To accomplish the objectives mentioned above, the close reading of the poems is informed by theoretical aspects related to photography, cognitive poetics and, needless to say, ekphrasis itself. A detailed account of such theoretical features is provided in the first chapter, which comprises the definition of the concept of ekphrasis, its historical evolution, its taxonomy, and the decoding process of the ekphrastic text. The chapter also introduces the figure-ground phenomenon and its relevance to the interpretation of the ekphrastic text, while presenting, eventually, some crucial theoretical aspects which shape the photographic phenomenon. The second chapter offers a close reading of three poems inspired by paintings, belonging all of them to *Thrall*, Trethewey's poetry collection inspired by casta paintings of eighteenth-century New Spain. The third chapter, on its part, includes the close reading of two poems based on snapshots taken by photographers Clifton Johnson and Ernest J. Bellocq

at the dawn of the 20th century, which can be found in *Domestic Work* and *Bellocq's Ophelia*, respectively.

The application of those theoretical concepts to the process of close reading has proved eye-opening: it has helped me to understand the complex phenomenon of ekphrasis, thus allowing me to overcome the initial skepticism regarding the potential of ekphrasis to portray a scene whose visual counterpart is absent, just as it does when the text can be contrasted with its visual referent. Furthermore, the stylistic analysis of the texts employing figure-ground dynamics or, more specifically, paying attention to parallel and deviant structures, proves to be helpful when exploring ekphrastic poetry. As for the particularities of each medium and how they condition the approach to the ekphrastic text, in the case of painting, its absolute dependence on human mediation invites the poetic voice to question the intentionality of each detail on the canvas, while theoretical and philosophical aspects seem to constitute the key to interpreting and making sense of Trethewey's photography-based poems. Finally, Trethewey's use of ekphrasis, regardless of the medium each poem emerges from, pursues the constant objective of investing with humanity and dignity the individuals who, either through the painter's brush or the camera lens, undergo a racialized, objectified, or sexualized depiction.

Introduction

Even though poetry and painting, the "sister arts" par excellence, have been the fields where ekphrasis has most commonly taken place, the emergence of photography in the 19th century offered one more art to engage in the ekphrastic dynamics, expanding through its exclusive features the possibilities of the whole ekphrastic process. The different nature of each medium entails major differences in the way that photography and painting are received, and reinterpreted through words. Nevertheless, the ideas of past, memory or loss aroused by photographs find common ground with painting in the works of Natasha Trethewey.

Trethewey's relation with poetry begins with her father, Eric Trethewey, a poet himself, while her interest in ekphrasis starts with her fascination with photography and its suitability to explore, visually and textually, her sense of loss, fueled in large part by the death of her mother, murdered by her second husband. Even the least ekphrastic of her works, her Pulitzer Prize–winning collection *Native Guard,* is deeply connected with past, memory, and loss. The relevance of race in this collection is extended to her other works, explained this fact, to a large extent, by her biracial condition and the conflicting emotions caused by her racialized experience; while the honoring of black subjects is also a constant feature, which responds to, if not elegiac intentions—as in the said collection—, social purposes.

As for the methodology employed in this project, the close reading of the poems is informed by theoretical aspects belonging to the fields of ekphrasis, cognitive poetics, and the theory of photography. A detailed account of such theoretical features is provided in the first chapter, starting with the definition of the concept of ekphrasis, its historical evolution, typology, and the decoding process of the ekphrastic text. The second section of the chapter is devoted to cognitive poetics and the introduction of the figure-ground phenomenon, while the last one focuses on the peculiarities of the photographic medium.

The corpus selection was performed not only bearing in mind a balance between the parts devoted to painting and photography, but also the thematic variety and the possibilities offered by each text in the close reading process, which comprises the second and third chapters of this paper. Thus, the second chapter deals with the analysis of poems about paintings, all of them belonging to *Thrall*, a work largely inspired by casta[1] paintings of eighteenth-century New Spain. The third chapter, provides a close reading of two poems based on photographs from the turn of the twentieth century, belonging one of them to *Domestic Work*, a collection which takes inspiration from Clifton Johnson's photographs of the American South and its peoples; the other to *Belloqc's Ophelia*, based on Ernest J. Bellocq's photographs of prostitutes from Storyville, the red-light district of New Orleans at the time.

Taking into account these considerations, the aims pursued in this project are four: first, to explore the reception of the ekphrastic text depending on the presence/absence of its visual counterpart; second, to assess the suitability of figure-ground dynamics when it comes to the stylistic analysis of ekphrastic texts; third, to examine how the peculiarities of each medium shape the way in which photography and painting are ekphrastically approached; and four, to analyze the role of ekphrasis in Trethewey's selected texts, as well as the use that the author makes of it to suit her purposes.

[1] Depictions of the mixed-race unions of the peoples of the New World, which had the purpose of illustrating the different race combinations and the name given to the product of each union (mestizo, mulatto, castizo, lobo, coyote, torna atrás...)

1. Theoretical foundations

1.1. Ekphrasis: definition, evolution, typology, and decoding process.

Contemporary assumptions about ekphrasis tend to limit its scope to the verbal representation, particularly poetic, of visual arts, especially painting. However, the fact is that the original meaning of the concept was far from being restricted to the poetic description of an object, and rather linked to the field of rhetoric and oratory. The first definitions can be found in the *Progymnasmata*[2] and all of them agree in defining ekphrasis as "a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes" (Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination* 2). Thus, works of art do not constitute any specific category among the variety of subject matters suggested in the *Progymnasmata,* and ekphrasis is not defined as a text or textual excerpt but as a type of speech which aims to have a particular effect on an audience. This "quality of vividness" is called *enargeia,* and its purpose is to move the listeners while making them feel eyewitnesses of the events depicted (Webb, "Ekphrasis ancient and modern" 13). The instance most often cited as the earliest referent of ekphrasis, Homer's description of the shield given to Achilles by Hephaestus in the Iliad, must actually be understood within the frame of this original notion of ekphrasis. Although commonly used as an example of ekphrasis based on an object's description, the narrative focuses on the process of the making of the shield rather than on the shield itself. As Ruth Webb remarks, the interest here is on "the narrative unfolding . . . , its status as a description not of an object but of a process" (11).

This broad definition of the concept which has its origin in a mental image instead of a particular work of art and focuses on the process of representation rather than on the object of its inspiration remains virtually unaltered until the twentieth century. It is Leo Spitzer who, in 1955, publishes "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or Content vs. Metagrammar" redefining

[2] A collection of rhetorical treatises consisting of exercises used for the training of students in oratory.

ekphrasis and narrowing its scope to "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (207). This redefinition will be a crucial turning point, given the significance and impact that it will have on subsequent literature about the subject. In 1958 Jean H. Hagstrum publishes *The Sister Arts* and, similarly to Spitzer, reduces the field of use of ekphrasis to poems which make reference to artworks. He clarifies, nonetheless, "that [his] usage is more limited than the usual one" (18).

These two scholarly publications awoke the interest in the topic among a considerable number of critics during the second half of the twentieth century, an interest not only in ekphrasis but also in the relation between verbal and visual arts. We can include here the work of critics such as James A. W. Heffernan, Murray Krieger or W. J. T. Mitchell. Heffernan defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation," a definition which he considers "sharp and elastic at the same time" (3). He points out the complexity behind its apparent simplicity, while remarking the fact that pictorialism and iconicity are excluded, as ekphrasis for him only "represents representation itself" (4). Even though this definition does not explicitly limit the application of ekphrasis to the visual arts, implicitly, the fact remains that the representation of a pre-represented subject practically ascribes ekphrasis to this realm. Heffernan's definition seems to have been quite influential, as later definitions of the concept tend to resemble his, e.g. "verbal re-representation in words of a prior visual representation" (Kafalenos 289), or "mimesis in the second degree" (Yacobi 600).

If defining ekphrasis certainly does not lack complexity, providing a classification is not less of a challenge. The main taxonomy may be the one offered by John Hollander, who claims that ekphrasis can be divided depending on the nature of the artwork being represented: real or imaginary. Thus, texts classified as "actual ekphrasis" are those which "entail engagements with particular and identifiable works of art," while "notional ekphrasis"

is “the description, often elaborately detailed, of purely fictional painting or sculpture that is indeed brought into being by the poetic language itself” (4). Mitchell does not completely agree with this classification, pointing out that, to some extent, all the instances of ekphrasis are notional as a result of an unconscious tendency to attempt to eliminate and substitute the object by the textual image that the ekphrasis creates (157).

Hollander’s classification is further subdivided by Peter Barry, who separates actual ekphrasis into “closed ekphrasis” and “open ekphrasis”. The first case concerns those poems which make explicit the fact that they are dealing with a painting rather than with “a real witnessed event” while, on the other hand, open ekphrasis shows the object “unframed,” thus offering the possibility of being interpreted as the description of a real scene instead of “a pictorial representation of that scene”. As for notional ekphrasis, it can be further subdivided into “fictional” and “conceptual”. In the case of fictional ekphrasis the object to which the poem makes reference is imaginary but presented “in entirely realist terms.” Conversely, in the case of conceptual ekphrasis the imaginary object has “supra-realist” features impossible to find in any real object. The poems of most interest, according to Barry, tend to be those belonging to the open-actual and conceptual-notional subcategories (156).

Andrew Laird provides the concepts “factual” and “fictional” ekphrasis, which are basically a reformulation of Hollander’s “actual” and “notional” terms, offering as well a second type of ekphrastic division between what he calls “obedient” and “disobedient” ekphrastic poems. In the case of obedient ekphrasis the description is limited to those aspects that can be “consistently visualized,” while disobedient ekphrasis implies greater difficulty in the visualization or translation of a visual artwork, as it “breaks free from the discipline of the imagined object”. Most cases of ekphrasis tend to “disobedience,” since they can present descriptions of thought or movement, flashbacks, digressions and so on (19-20). To these

classifications a few more could be added; nevertheless, the limited dimensions of this project do not allow a detailed account of all of them.

As for the decoding process of the ekphrastic text, it is, according to Mitchell (152-154), defined by three phases. In the first one, "ekphrastic indifference," the divergences between the two media interfering in the ekphrasis make it virtually impossible for the verbal representation to approximate, let alone equal the visual one, because words cannot "sight" the objects they stand for, only "cite" them. The second phase, "ekphrastic hope," is characterized by the overcoming of the impossibility presented in the first stage through metaphor or imagination, "mak[ing] us see". The last phase is called "ekphrastic fear" and it takes place after realizing that the visual representation was actually made possible through words, giving place to the possibility of overcoming and eclipsing the visual referent of its inspiration (152-154). The development of these three phases is dependent on the absence of the visual referent, since its presence would not require the readers to shape the described elements in their minds. Should the visual counterpart be present, the interest would lie in comparing image and text, trying to make sense of what has been depicted and, equally important, what has been ignored and why.

1.2. Cognitive poetics and ekphrasis

Perception and cognition, when it comes to the reading process, do not differ significantly from what is experienced in everyday life. Experts have posed that cognition derives from human interaction with the real world, which ultimately motivates language. This basic principle of cognitive poetics asserts that our knowledge of the world, originating from our own interaction with it, lays down the foundation of language understanding, which can also be extended to the language of literature (Gavins and Steen 8-9). Cognitive poetics, although dependent on multiple branches of cognitive science, finds its main input in

linguistics and cognitive psychology (Stockwell 4). Its application to a text allows understanding the "process by which intuitive interpretations are formed into expressible meanings," (8) while offering "a raised awareness of certain patterns that might have been subconscious or not even noticed at all" (7). One of these patterns is the figure-ground phenomenon, arguably the aspect of cognitive poetics theory most closely related to the visual arts and, consequently, most useful when facing the analysis of ekphrastic poetry.

Born from gestalt theories in psychology, the figure-ground phenomenon explores the organization of the perceptive process, pointing out the innate human cognitive capacity of distinguishing in a visual field those elements—figures—that stand out from the other components, which go unnoticed and conform what is known as the (back)ground. This mechanism, rather than being exclusive to the field of vision, has its correlation in the textual realm. In both spheres, explains Stockwell, there are some features that confer prominence on some parts, making them "most likely to be seen as the figure" (15).[3] In the case of poetry, such features are highlighted through stylistic devices, especially deviation and parallelism, as will be seen in the analyzed poems. Even though they share a common purpose, parallelism and deviation are diametrically opposed in their mode of functioning: the former, consisting in the repeated use of regular patterns; the latter, based in the introduction of irregularities (Leech 62). In the case of parallel structures, beyond just drawing attention to some specific parts of a text, they "make us look for parallel or contrastive meaning links between those parallel parts" (Short 15). Deviation, on its part, takes what is linguistically

[3] Stockwell points at the following aspects as those that most often make a figure prominent:

> • it will be regarded as a self-contained object or feature in its own right, with well-defined edges separating it from the ground;
> • it will be moving in relation to the static ground;
> • it will precede the ground in time or space;
> • it will be a part of the ground that has broken away, or emerges to become the figure;
> • it will be more detailed, better focused, brighter, or more attractive than the rest of the field;
> • it will be on top of, or in front of, or above, or larger than the rest of the field that is then the ground (15).

normal or "expected" as the background, while the textual part which breaks language rules or does not meet such expectations is the foregrounded element (12). Whether they be lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, or semantic, deviant elements interfere with the normal process of communication, leaving a gap in the reader's comprehension which must be filled. When it comes to semantic deviation, metaphor is the fundamental figure, forcing the reader to rely on analogy to have that void filled (Leech 61).

When facing the analysis of the ekphrastic text, the figure-ground phenomenon becomes of vital importance, as the nature of the ekphrastic process itself implies the attainment and coexistence of several figure-ground phases. The interpretation of the poem is thus conditioned by the amount of these figure-ground processes which are accessible to the reader, since just as relevant as what is there might be what has been ignored. When dealing with an ekphrastic poem based on a painting, even in those cases when the access to the artistic object which inspired the poet is possible, more often than not the inspiration of the original artist, that is, her/his referent in real life, is unattainable. It is here where the particular nature of photography makes a difference, inasmuch as the real-world referent is inevitably "attached" in some way to the picture, conditioning the perception of the figure-ground processes which take place in this case. These aspects, together with some others discussed below, allow not only exploring the ekphrastic features inherent to the photographic phenomenon, but also expanding the possibilities of the whole ekphrastic process.

1.3. Photography and ekphrasis

The particular nature of the photographic phenomenon is without doubt the issue which has drawn most attention among the theorists of photography, while simultaneously causing a great deal of controversy. What Mikael Pettersson calls "proximity aspect," (3) that

is, the special power that photographs have to place the depicted subject in a position of closeness with regard to the observer, has been addressed in different ways throughout the history of photography. On the one hand, that closeness has often been associated with the controversial thesis that photographs actually allow observers to contemplate the photographed subject. Roland Barthes, for instance, claims that "a specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent" (*Camera Lucida* 5). In contrast with drawings or paintings, which are always coded messages, photographs are "invisible" (*Camera Lucida* 6). Kendall Walton, in the same vein, claims that, as opposed to pictures, "photographs are transparent [and] we see the world through them" (251). Even though a picture might be virtually undistinguishable from a photograph in terms of realism, when looking at a picture we can only see "what the artist *thought* was there" (263), while photographs "are counterfactually dependent on the photographed scene" (264).

On the other hand, photographs have also been considered "traces" left behind their referent. Thus, according to this position, in spite of being analogous to the retinal image, they are not analogous to what is actually perceived. While photographs transcribe a sensory phenomenon to which they are causally linked, the graphical representation obtained is arbitrary with regard to that phenomenon (Eco 33). Paradoxically, even though this theory denies the analogy between a picture and its referent, the concept of "trace" takes us back to the aforementioned "proximity aspect," insomuch as "the kind of trace photographs are has the capacity to evoke the sense of closeness photographs provide" (Pettersson 12). Be it as it may, the fact remains that there is something in the nature of photographs which compels the observer to approach them in a different way. Needless to say, whenever that observer is a poet seeking a source of inspiration, the ekphrastic process becomes affected by those differences.

Another crucial issue when discussing photography is the objectification of the photographed subject, which acquires a special dimension when such subject is a woman, as is the case with Bellocq's photographs. Susan Sontag in *On Photography* points out that the use of the camera always implies "an aggression" (4). Hence, this object can be seen as a "predatory weapon" or a "phallus," and its use as a violation which "turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (10). In this connection, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey argued that also in cinema the controlling gaze is always male, being the female body objectified and reduced to erotic spectacle (19). Such objectification of women implies, consequently, that their photographs become doubly objectified (Henning 202). Similarly, John Berger explains that the relation of women to themselves is determined by de fact that they "watch themselves being looked at" by men. The objectifying process is hence intensified, since women become to themselves "an object–and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (47). Nevertheless, none of these remarks considers the fact that the viewer does not necessarily have to be a heterosexual male. Mulvey herself recognized in subsequent works that the female spectator can actually identify with the masculine active position in the form of a "transvestite," that is, alternating genders (Chaudhury 44), while the possibility of lesbian spectatorship was explored by some other prominent figures of feminist film theory such as Teresa de Lauretis.

One more fact to take into consideration is that the perspective of the subject observing the photograph is, according to Victor Burgin, identified with that of the camera, oscillating his/her look between narcissism and voyeurism (189). Burgin also hints at such fetishistic implications when he claims that "the photograph, like the fetish, is the result of a look which has, instantaneously and forever, isolated, 'frozen', a fragment of the spatio-

temporal continuum" (190)[4]. The analogy between the nature of photography and fetishism is discussed as well by Christian Metz, who remarks that the photographic object also offers protection, in this case against death, as it "cut[s] off a piece of space and time. . . keeping it unchanged while the world around continues to change (85). Just like the fetish, photography means "both loss . . . . and protection against loss" (84)

The fact that photographs can be seen as a portion of frozen time and space in a specific point of the past inevitably holds particular spatiotemporal connotations, which definitely make one more difference when considering how photographic images are perceived in contrast to other kinds of pictures. Hence, concepts such as past, memory, nostalgia, or death, are intimately linked to the notion of time, and the contemplation of a photograph inexorably conjures them up. With respect to this matter, Sontag asserts that, essentially, all photographs are *memento mori*, part of an elegiac art which activates nostalgia (11) and constitutes "the inventory of mortality" (54). Nevertheless, when considering the relation of photographs with time, there are not only links connecting them to the past, but also to the future. Sonesson, addressing Husserl's study of consciousness, makes reference to the fact that each single moment of time inevitably incorporates "retentions" of what has happened before, and "protentions" of what is to happen after. As a consequence, when a photograph is observed, the beholder is aware "of at least the categorical form of what has gone before, and what is to follow" (83).

Not only time, but also motion has an effect on the way a photograph is perceived. Something particular about the nature of photographs is the fact that, by petrifying a moment,

[4] For Freud, the fetish is that object which alleviates the anxiety caused to the male child when he discovers that the feminine body lacks a penis. The fetish is thus a substitute for the woman's penis, which "inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor," while remaining "a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (154). As for lesbian fetishism, in de Lauretis's view, lesbian desire, even though still founded upon a fantasy of castration, is understood "not as lack of a penis but as 'a narcissistic wound to the subject's body image'," being in this case one's own "lack" that invests desire in the fetish. (Chaudhury 86).

they allow us to see things impossible to perceive with the naked eye. Walter Benjamin illustrates this by referring the fact that, even though there is a way to describe how a person walks, only a photograph can capture and reveal the precise instant a person starts to walk (7). Those blurred moments caught on camera, given their unnatural and exclusive nature, often become the element that catches the viewer's attention. This fact can be used to introduce the last theoretical aspect I will tackle in this chapter: Roland Barthes's concept of *punctum*.

The *punctum*, Barthes says, is that element in the picture "which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces" the viewer (26). Present only in some photographs, this element that "pierces" and disturbs the observer is not prompted by the analysis of the image, but appears spontaneously, as an unintended effect. This is one of the reasons why sometimes the *punctum* cannot be appreciated when looking at a photograph, but afterwards, through memory, when the photograph is no longer in front of the observer (53). This disturbing element, adds Barthes, entails a "subtle beyond – as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see," (59) making the viewer contemplate those aspects which are not directly there, both spatially and temporally.

2. Of canvas and paper: poems inspired by paintings

2.1. "*Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus; or, The Mulata*"

Inspired by Velazquez's homonymous painting,[5] Trethewey's sonnet stands as an instance of the power of ekphrasis to entirely alter the perception and meaning of the visual referent of the text. The foreground of the picture shows a young maid in the kitchen, surrounded by different utensils, while in the background we can see on the window-sill a representation of Christ in the Supper at Emmaus. In the poem, the conspicuous use of parallelism foregrounds the figure of the black maid, while the metaphorical nature of these parallel structures guides the reader to different readings of the woman's existence. She is the constant tenor in the metaphors that vertebrate the poem, while the different objects that surround her become the different vehicles.

From the beginning of the poem the maid repeatedly becomes the kitchen utensils and objects that surround her: "She is the vessels" (1), the "copper pot" (2), the "pitcher" (2), the "mortar" (4), the "stack of bowls" (6), the "basket" (7), the "cloth" (8), and the "rag" (9). She is invested with the humble usefulness that defines these objects, alluding to the fact that, indeed, her existence seems to revolve around the satisfaction of other people's needs. "Bent over" (4), she is the "pestle at rest in the mortar [both] "still angled / in [their] posture of use" (5–6), which suggests that she is probably leaning on the table to take a rest from her obligations, from a life meant to meet other's needs instead of her own. Just like the basket, "hung / by a nail on the wall" (8), and the "white cloth bundled / in it" (8–9) she is tied, bound to the role assigned to her as a racialized woman.

[5] See figure 1 in Appendix B. The visual sources of inspiration are collected in Appendix B, while Tretheway's poems appear in Appendix A.

An important shift takes place in line eleven, when she becomes the "echo / of Jesus at table, framed in the scene behind her" (11–12). Contrary to all the previous associations, she is now compared not just to the representation of Christ as an object, but more precisely to Jesus himself, replacing the objectified dimension previously assigned to her with a human, even sacred one, and thus establishing an analogy between both subjects. The Supper at Emmaus behind her, portraying the first time that Jesus's resurrected body is seen after crucifixion, stands as a source of hope against suffering and hardship, while suggesting through the analogy a sacralization of her figure and her labor.

The contrast between light and darkness, between white and black, prominent in Velazquez's picture is not only reflected, but emphasized, in the poem. The foregrounding of this feature is achieved through the use of three colors which become crucial not only at a descriptive level, but also at an interpretative one: white, black, and red. The maid is, as the title states, a mulatta, being this fact evidence of the convergence in her of "white" and "black blood." The red color is precisely the connecting point between the other two, as it is in effect the actual color of blood. Her shadow[6] on the wall is a stain of "the color of blood" (11), a reminder of the fact that her blood is stained by his black origins. On the other hand, most of the objects she is associated with in the first part of the poem are white: "the white pitcher" (2), "the bulb of garlic" (7), and "the white cloth" (8) stand as an ironic reminder now of white blood running through her veins while being dehumanized. It is significant the fact that it is precisely this color that also links her to Jesus, comparing "his white corona [with] her white cap" (13). She, a black subject, is in this way inserted in an analogy with the human representation of the divine.

[6]Her shadow is also compared to "the shape of a thumb," (11) Hence, the thumb is indispensable for the efficient functioning of the hand, allowing it to grab and handle objects, while the work of the young woman is also crucial in the lives of the people she serves.

In the last words of the poem, Trethewey points out at the woman's awareness of her mixed-race condition and the implications that this has, as "she leans / into what she knows. Light falls in half her face" (14). She knows that she is half white, but the burden of African blood also stands as an undeniable fact. This is also suggested in the sonnet opening lines, when she is clutching "the white pitcher" (2) while "the black one edged in red / [is] upside–down" (3–4). The connotations given here to white and black can be easily inferred: the woman is grabbing the white pitcher as an unconscious desire of clinging to the white side of her mixed condition, while the black pitcher "edged in red" and placed upside down stands for the negative connotations of black blood.

Even though, at first sight, the poem meets most of those aspects expected in a sonnet, it shows a degree of deviance from the norm. Although a perfect sonnet to the naked eye, when seen close up, the text lacks its particular rhyming pattern. Similarly, the woman, although perfectly human, is deprived form something inherent to a person: humanity. Through the sonnet's volta, this idea is not only upturned but also compensated by the fact that she is presented as a subject worthy of being compared to the divine. Beyond the effect that the combined use of parallelism and metaphor has in guiding the reader through the reinterpretation of the figure of the maid, the abundance of prepositions denoting spatiality throughout the composition such as "before" (1), "toward" (2), "in" (3), "beside" (7), "on" (10) or "behind" (12), serves as a guide for the speaker to lead the reader's/viewer's gaze throughout the canvas. The use of present tense reinforces the sense of immediate perception and the constant use of the definite article enhances the link and the correspondence between painting and poem. The convergence of all these provides thorough guidance when it comes to observing and rereading the painting in both a literal and a figurative way. Therefore, the ekphrastic process allows a reinterpretation of the painting which suits Trethewey's purpose

of bringing humanity back to the dehumanized, utilitarian figure of the black or "mulata" maid.

2.2. "*De Español y Negra; Mulata*"

In Cabrera's painting[7], as was usual in the eighteenth century's casta paintings, we can see the white father, the black mother, and their mixed-race child. Throughout the composition, the importance of the depiction of light and darkness is, just as in the previous poem, of crucial importance. Trethewey draws attention to the various shades that the painter uses in his rendering of the different members of the family, being the face of the mulatto child "in half-light" (17), while the "painter's light / find[s the father] – his profile glowing as if / lit beneath the skin" (10–12), whereas, in the mother's case, the "moon–white crescent of her eye / [is] the only light in her face" (23–24). The light that the artist decides to shed on each figure is directly proportional to the conceptions of purity and impurity that white and black blood, respectively, have historically possessed. Tretheway, nevertheless, successfully reverses the negative connotations related to darkness, when she empowers the figure of the black mother by giving her the ability of "a great pendulum [to] eclips[e] the light" (28).[8]

In order to achieve the aforementioned empowering of the black figure, the evident dominance visually allocated to the father by Cabrera in his painting is highlighted at first. Trethewey begins her poem by directing the reader's attention to the center of the canvas, where the "stemmed fruit / in the child's small hand" (1–2) is placed, after having been probably "plucked" (6) from "the mother's basket" (4). The analogy between child and fruit,

[7] See figure 2 (Appendix B).
[8] Toni Morrison explores in *Playing in the Dark* the idea of the black figure as a necessary complement in American literature to the construction of the white self, thus implying that some notions of freedom or individualism were created over the subjugation of black peoples (64), while self-aggrandizement by comparison was usually employed to enhance the virtues of white subjects over black ones. In her words: "Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable" (59). Similarly, in Cabrera's painting it is on account of the darkness of the black figure that the white one stands out.

although easy to detect intuitively from the very first lines, is confirmed in lines six and seven, adding to the comparison a parallel between the mother's basket and her womb. Here, the absence of a coordinated conjunction draws the attention to the construction, foregrounding the implicit metaphor between the elements separated by the semicolon: "basket, fruit; womb, child" (7). Both the fruit and the child are under "the dominion // of [the father's] touch" (12–12), who, by holding the fruit against the child's face, seems to be "at once / possessing both" (15–16). The girl has thus been pulled out from her mother's womb and the darkness associated to it, becoming the father's belonging, his patriarchal dominance clearly reflected and reinforced by the possessive gesture that Cabrera confers on him.

Having made clear the father's dominant position in the painting, both in a visual and an interpretative levels, the poet now draws the reader's attention to the most striking feature on the canvas, visually speaking: "the mother's flat outline, / the black cloak making her blacker still" (21–22). This deep black figure, with barely indistinguishable facial features stands in stark contrast with "the lush depths // of paint" (20–21). The contrast between her and the luminous conditions in which the child, and especially the father, have been depicted is made evident with her dark body "advancing toward them / like spilled ink spreading on a page" (26–27), threatening its whiteness. At this point, Trethewey takes advantage of the artist's obvious intention of showing the black woman in a dark, plain, unflattering way by describing her as a "great pendulum [with the ability of] eclipsing the light" (28) which, as stated above, "glow[s] as if lit beneath the [father's] skin" (11–12). Thus, she places the feminine black figure in a position of power by making her able to overshadow the white masculine figure, something quite ironic, considering the fact that she was probably rendered in such dull terms to enhance the father's magnificence.

The reader's gaze in this case is prompted to explore de canvas in an approaching movement, from the background to the foreground, emphasizing the figure of the black

woman, which ends up covering the figures placed farther away to which the reader has been introduced at first. Spatial references and indications from the speaker are in this case virtually absent; nevertheless, there are some crucial elements in the text that compensate for this lack. The reader is introduced in the ekphrastic dynamic when the speaker claims that "the child . . . looks out as if / toward you" (17–18), being in this way impelled to look at the picture in a dimension which transcends the material limits of the canvas. Shortly after, when referring to the contrast present between the child's arm and the mother's cloak, the rhetorical question "how not to see it'" (20) leaves the reader with no other option but to focus on the elements pointed out by the poetic voice. This combination of devices succeeds in foregrounding the figure of the black mother, deflecting attention from the white father, and, more importantly, balancing in this way the unequal treatment between both subjects made by the artist. The child, as pointed out in another poem from the collection, "Taxonomy," is "a palimpsest of paint – / layers of color, history rendering [her] / that precise shade of in-between," whose presence redefines the meaning of the whole scene: she seems to be looking the viewer "in the eye," as if seeking answers to the challenge of having to make sense of the two colors, the two worlds merging in her body, of the dichotomy that her mixed-race origin entails.

2.3. "*Torna Atrás*"

Racial stratification, obliteration of identity, self-assertion, and show of power are some of the concepts that coexist and interact in both Trethewey's poem and the anonymous painting[9] which provides the source of inspiration for her ekphrastic text. The ways in which each author presents those elements are, nevertheless, diametrically opposed. Whereas the painting can be considered a prime example of the archetypal elements that define the

[9] See figure 3.

universe of casta paintings, Trethewey, yet again, uses ekphrastic dynamics to reverse the negative portrayal of a racialized subject. Parallelism, one more time, is the main textual foregrounding device, parallel structures that contribute to the final metaphorical construction encapsulating the meaning of the poem.

In the very first line of the poem we learn that "the unknown artist has rendered the father a painter." Hence, he is not only portrayed as the possessor of culture, but also as the agent in control of what is being painted, in this case his wife. The woman posing "cannot see her likeliness, her less than mirror image / coming to life beneath his hand" (5), being thus presented as a passive, powerless figure who lacks control over the unflattering way in which she is depicted. When confronted with her real image in the scene, the elegant clothes she is wearing disappear, as well as her *chiqueador*. This dual depiction of the same subject allows using her as proof of her husband's social and economic status, while simultaneously obliterating her identity by depriving her from the right of possessing elegance and sophistication.

In line ten, after introducing the first of the parallel structures which vertebrate the poem, Tretheway shows three possible explanations for the aforementioned disparity, all of them leading to the enhancement of what has been intentionally denied: the acknowledgement of the woman's elegance and beauty. While the first conjecture suggests that the painting could still be unfinished, that the father "has yet to make her / beautiful" (10-11), the other two reverse the mistreatment of the woman's character by suggesting some negative traits held by the actual artist and the depicted painter as an explanation for the inaccuracy present in the portrait. Thus, the second option refers to a possible narcissistic and self-centered attitude on the part of the anonymous artist, who "perhaps to show his own skill – / has made the father a dilettante, incapable of capturing / his wife's beauty (14-16); while the last one suggests the incapacity of the father to see her beauty, afraid of revealing "the

illusion / immanent in her flesh" (17-18), that is to say, the "black blood" underlying her deceptively pale skin.

The presence of the child becomes the necessary piece to make sense of the whole painting. Had he been absent, it would have never been possible to determine the albino condition of his mother. The explanation behind the term used to name him, *torna atrás*, is found in the casta classificatory system, in which black subjects "were thought to embody a regression to an earlier moment of racial development" (Katzew 12).[10] In the case of the descendants of albinos, as is the case here, such regression is even more dramatic, more evident, since the child reveals the darkness that the genetic condition of the mother conceals.

The lines that follow in the poem introduce the ironic reference to the "Enlightenment hallowed rooms" (23) as the place where such "myopic" terms were born. "The wages of empire / is myopia," reads the poem, making reference to the consequences of imperialism, which works as a blurring lens preventing those who see through it to appreciate the "objects" of their gaze as equal human beings. Trethewey illustrates this matter alluding to her personal experience as the biracial child of a white father. As she has remarked in several interviews, as well as in some other poems, one of Eric Trethewey's early compositions, "Her Swing," has the following line: "I study my crossbreed child". In a conversation with Christian Teresi, Tretheway remarks that, as sweet as the poem may be, she has always been hurt by the fact "that he used the language of zoology, of animals, to describe his own child," while adding: "no human being is a crossbreed. To be a crossbreed actually means to be born of different species" (124). Undergirding her father's poem lies the implicit (probably unconscious) assumption that black people are actually not human, but of a different species; just exactly as the inaccuracy of the woman's depiction responds to her husband's

[10] Black people were situated at the lowest part of society, even below Indians, whose blood was, in fact, considered to be pure and, thus, suitable for purification and redemption at the third generation when mixed which Spanish. Black blood, conversely, was never redeemable (Katzew 10-11).

supposition that she is not human enough, not worthy of being portrayed with the elegance and refinement which emanate from her figure.

The parallel structures which determine the figure-ground dynamics in the poem are presented following a conditional pattern: “If I say” (9), “If you consider” (18), and “If I tell you” (22) are the elements introducing the condition, while “you might see” is the recurrent expression used to introduce the result. Therefore, while shedding light on those regular elements whose relevance is greater, the readers are subtly invited to see them as presented by the poetic voice. When paying attention to the disposition of such parallel elements, we can easily find a disruption, that is, a deviance, in their pattern, which sets a new figure-ground relationship among the already foregrounded elements. Thus, the last time that “you might see” (27) is introduced, one cannot but notice that, in contrast with what had been happening throughout the poem, it lacks the explicit introductory expression of the condition. The fact that such deviance takes place precisely when the apparently neutral poetic voice and Trethewey’s confessional “alter ego” become the same confirms the intuition that, ultimately, the poem may be about herself, about the conflicting emotions caused by her biracial condition.

3. Of shutters and pens: poems inspired by photographs

3.1. "Three Photographs"

Inspired by three photographs taken by Clifton Johnson circa 1902, this poem explores the different perspectives from which the photographic process may be approached. The poem is divided into three parts, each one an independent text corresponding to a different image. The first two sections offer contrasting insights into the thoughts of each one of the agents who take part in a photographic act, that is to say, the photographer and the photographed subject; whereas the point of view in the third section belongs to the person who contemplates the photographed scene. This last part of the poem also tempts readers to reflect on the reception of the ekphrastic process, owing to the fact that the text has to be decoded without its visual referent, in contrast to what happens with the rest of the poems analyzed in this project.

In "*Daybook April 1901*"[11], the first section, the reader is presented with the thoughts of the photographer while the snapshot is being taken. The part at hand begins and ends with the same idea: his limitations and his dependence on reality to arrange the elements of the composition. "What luck to find them here!" (1) and "how fortunate still / to have found them here" (17-18) are the words he repeats to address the inevitable fact that the aesthetic result of the scene he is capturing would have been completely different whether he had found that same landscape without the men, or the men in any other place, such as an "old cemetery / too full with new graves / and no flowers" (20-22). These lines, when considered in conjunction with the "little emotion" (10) of the men while they are precisely gathering

[11] See figure 4 (Appendix B).

flowers, has ominous implications that go completely unnoticed by the photographer, only worried about their aesthetic suitability for his composition.

The enthusiasm of the photographer about what is being captured by his camera is palpable as he considers the scene "a blessing" (9). This acquires a new dimension when connected with the discomfort expressed by the subject photographed in "*Cabbage Vendor*"[12], the second section of the poem. While in the photographer's eyes the men "make such good subjects" (11), he remains oblivious to the aggression the photographic act entails for the person at the other side of the lens. Whereas he considers that it is "always easy to pose," the photographed woman of the second part, irritated, wonders "What he want from me?" (2). The excitement, friendliness, and positive attitude of the photographer about an act that, in his view, is taking place in "an intimate setting, / the boughs nestling [them] / like brothers" (15-17), differs from the distance established by the cabbage vendor depicted in the second section. The cabbage seller addresses this by describing as natural both the process of picking up her cabbages, and the very moment when the latter meet in the pot with "salt pork" (15), like "kin" (18); in contrast, her relationship with both the photographic process and the photographer, she considers, by inference, quite the opposite, that is, she deems the relationship unnatural and the artist a stranger. Another reference to the unnatural, or more precisely, to the supernatural, is also present when she thinks of the camera as a "spirit box" (4), and her picture "unnatural like hoodoo love" (23). Such ideas, Sontag explains, conjure up a certain "primitive" fear, born from the belief that the photograph is a material part of the self, with the corollary that the camera can deprive the photographed subjects from some part of their being (123).

In the third section "*Wash Women,*" the poetic voice corresponds to that of the person observing the picture or, more precisely, to Trethewey's alter ego, as she confirms in an

[12] See figure 5 in Appendix B.

interview with Jill Petty (3). Just like "*Daybook April 1901*," this part of the poem is written following a circular structure, beginning and finishing in this case with the gaze of the women in the picture piercing the poet. In between, the emphasis is put on the importance of memories, both our own and those we learn from others, when it comes to contextualizing a photographic scene and figuring out the reality which surrounds its subject. In relation to this, Trethewey explains in the aforementioned interview that those memories that are not immediately ours, but acquired, also become a part of who we are (5). Because of this, when she found this particular picture in a gallery, the memories that she had constructed from what she had been told by the women in her family allowed her to establish a connection with the women in the picture, "feeling the gaze of the photographer over [her]" (3) as well. Thus, in this part of the poem she is able to become one of those women, whose faces are "common / as ones [she has] known" (7), while providing, through facts "[she has] only heard about" (9), a comprehensive and detailed reconstruction of the events that could have taken place in a day like that. The empathy she feels for the women is precisely what allows the recreation, contrary to what happens in the first section, where the speaker does not approach the subjects of his photograph at an emotional, human level.

When the attention is shifted back to the photographed scene, the serious faces of the women contrast with the previously described events. They walk back home, "shaded / by their loads" (39-40) both physically and metaphorically, the physical shadow over their faces a reminder of hardship in their lives. The references to light and whiteness conveyed by the "linens" (21), the "crocheted lace" (25), the fingers "glistening" (27), and the "milk-heavy breasts," clashes with the dark connotations of the shadow that the burden on their heads casts over their faces. The relaxed atmosphere and willingness to work previously described collides with the seriousness in their visage, suggesting an indelible trace of a life full of sacrifice. They face the photographer without squinting, while their "ready gaze" (41) goes

through the camera, through time, "straight ahead" (42) into Trethewey's eyes. Sontag, when discussing the rhetoric of the photographic portrait remarks that "facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject's essence," adding that this is the reason "why frontality seems right for ceremonial pictures" (30). Such solemnity and ceremonial nature is also observed in Trethewey's text, since there is an analogy between the washerwomen's workplace, where hymns are sung as if they were at church, and the laundry carried on their heads, compared with "church hats" (39), as if they were coming home from a religious service. Thus, their work not only becomes dignified, but also sacralized.

The analysis of this part of the poem is conditioned, as previously mentioned, by the fact that the access to the photograph which inspires it was not possible. In any case, this mishap ended up being quite convenient, inasmuch as it allowed me to explore the decoding process of the ekphrastic text when the visual referent is not present, which is, ironically, how most ekphrastic texts are supposed to be explored by the reader at first. The imperative need to find Johnson's photograph[13] in order to contrast it with the textual excerpt responds to the first phase described by Mitchell: ekphrastic indifference. Such skepticism stems from the unconscious assumption that the verbal representation will never equal the visual one, or, in Mitchell's words, the fact that the description of the object "can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do" (152).

The frustration caused by the absence of the visual referent is overcome in the second phase: ekphrastic hope, as it is here where language can actually make us see. In this particular case, not one, but two ekphrastic processes take place simultaneously: on the one hand the description of the women in their way back home which, as a description of an

[13] To fully understand the dimension of that need, it must be said that the digital collection of Clifton Jonshon's works comprises more than 3,800 photographs, and all of them were examined in order to find the one at hand; unfortunately, to no avail.

actual picture, is an example of closed ekphrasis; on the other, the women washing the clothes, which by being the description of a "witnessed" event, stands as an instance of open ekphrasis. In both cases, the aims of the ekphrastic description are successfully conveyed: following the poem's words, the readers are able to perceive the piercing gaze of the women on them; in addition, the coming to life of the "remembered" scene allows readers to behold the events taking place in the imagined memory, while also conveying the sensorial beauty which surrounds the scene.

The third and last phase, ekphrastic fear, takes place when the reader becomes aware of the fact that the contemplation of the visual referent might eclipse its textual counterpart. In this case, the lack of Johnson's photograph makes it possible to experience and receive both the closed at the open ekphrastic descriptions at the same level, something that would have been impossible if the actual image had been present. The fact that the text lacks a visual referent also compels the reader to look for details in the words of the poem, intensifying the literary experience, instead of resorting to the photograph in search of them. Regardless of whether or not the ekphrasis was successfully conveyed, conflicting emotions inevitably arise when imagining the possibility of observing Johnson's photograph, not only because of the fear that the text may be eclipsed by the photograph, but also because of the disappointment that could be experienced when looking at it. As Mitchell explains, this would definitely "spoil [the] whole game," which makes the reader wish "for the photographs to stay invisible" (154). Paradoxically, their absence, contrary to what was experienced beforehand, is now preferable.

When considering the three parts of the poem together, we can observe some differences between the first two and this last one. To establish a difference between Trethewey's voice in "*Wash Women,*" and the voice of the speakers in the other two sections, some linguistic deviations are used both in "*Daybook April 1901*" and "*Cabbage Vendor*". In the first case

the poetic voice corresponds to the photographer, either to Johnson himself or to one of his contemporaries, and the linguistic deviations remind the readers that they are listening to someone from a different historical period. The most remarkable example is the presence of the word "Negro" (5), both obsolete and deeply offensive nowadays, but whose use was normalized back then. In "*Cabbage Vendor*," the deviations remind the reader that the voice corresponds to a working-class African American woman. Thus, we can observe some deviant grammatical aspects characteristic of African-American Vernacular English, such as the omission of the third person singular –s, as we can see in "he say" (1), or "nothing natural last" (8); the absence of copula in "he gone" (3); or the use of invariant *be* in "I be in my kitchen" (14) and "he be seeing me" (27). In both cases the use of repetitions serves also a foregrounding purpose: in the first part "What luck to find them here!" (1), and "how fortunate still / to have found them here" (17-18); in the second one "that's natural," which appears in lines thirteen and eighteen. These are the duplicated sentences that we appreciate in the disclosure of their thoughts, a repetition that not only draws attention to the importance of those words to understand their opposing views, but also mirrors the cyclical and recurring way in which thoughts are presented in the brain, while enhancing the feeling of hearing the speakers's inner voice.

Finally, the poem also resorts to an intriguing type of structural *gradatio*: a progression concerning the humanity of the photographed subjects. In the first part, the words of the photographer, although showing kindness, present the subjects of the picture as objects, as mere elements convenient to his aesthetic purpose. In the second section a further step to the humanization of the subject takes place, as the voice of the photographed person can not only be heard, but also manages to convey her discomfort and awareness of her position, as something "distant and small" (28) to the photographer. In these two sections the fact that the subjects are not looking back at the camera, pretending to be oblivious of its presence,

enhances the voyeuristic and thus objectifying implications described in the first chapter of this essay. Conversely, in the last section of the poem, the women look directly at the photographer, the camera, and the viewer; determined, resolute, as a human being looks at another, on equal terms.

3.2. "Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye"

When observing Ernest J. Bellocq's picture[14] we see one of the many women he photographed in the brothels of the Storyville district of New Orleans. She is sitting on a chair, her head resting on her left hand, her legs crossed, and her gaze on the glass she is holding in her right hand. In the title of Trethewey's poem, curiously enough, she is not holding the glass, but actually drinking from it. This difference anticipates the dynamics developed in the text between stillness and movement, between a frozen moment and the ongoing sequence of events to which it belongs. On the other hand, the erotic connotations of a feminine body caught on camera are intensified not only by the objectification inherent to the photographic process, but also by the particular conditions of the medium, including the physicality of the photograph, whose connections with voyeurism and fetishism are also hinted at in the text.

"The glass is the only thing moving" (1) as the opening words of a poem inspired in a photograph, a theoretically frozen moment, are quite revealing. If we remember, one of the special features about photographs is that they allow us to contemplate movement in a way that the naked eye cannot perceive. That blurriness depicting motion in an unnatural and unexpected manner can easily disturb the observer, thereby becoming the *punctum* of the photograph, as is the case here. Trethewey herself, when commenting on this photograph in an interview with David Haney, makes reference to the blurred glass as the striking element

[14] See figure 6.

which makes her start to "contemplate all that's not there, all that you can't see" (19). Similarly, the "tiny feather-backed rocking chairs / poised to move with the slightest wind or breath" (11-12) and the contorted arms of the statuette "stretched above / her head" (13-14) work as another reminder of resistance against stillness, of the unnatural immobility with which the photographic act is endowed.

In the lines that follow in the poem, the reader becomes involved in the observing process: "The viewer you become / taking her in" not only has strong connotations regarding voyeuristic aspects, but also turns the observer into the person who possesses the photographed subject. In this case the sense of possession acquires sexual connotations which are reinforced by the implications that the verb "take" might suggest. From this point on, Trethewey describes the movements of the observer's eyes throughout the woman's body in an upward direction, starting with her feet and finishing with her hair. Interestingly enough, rather than offering instructions to explore the image, as happens in some of the analyzed poems, the poetic voice here seems to be describing the observer's gaze through the photograph, as if a voyeur were caught in the act and the movements of his eyes suddenly revealed.[15]

On the other hand, the woman's description starts at her feet, usually a part of the body which holds fetishistic connotations. In the same vein, in the second interaction with the reader, he is accused of being the owner of the fingerprint present in the photograph: "And there, on the surface of it all, a thumb- / print – perhaps yours?" (17-18). This reminds us of Metz's list of the fetishistic characteristics inherent to the photographic medium. Thus, the physicality of the photograph, the fact that it can be touched, carried, or handled, makes it suitable to work as a fetish (88). At the same time, the fact that "the photographic lexis has no

[15] This poem, just like *Torna Atrás* is presented through the use of mise-en-abîme, being in both cases the duplicated element (in this case the inserted narrative, in *Torna Atrás* the duplicated portrayal of the woman), the key to making sense of the text, while implying a timeless recurrence of the ideas conveyed.

fixed duration" (81) or, in other words, that the amount of time it is observed depends exclusively on the beholder, who is the controlling agent of the look, reinforces both its voyeuristic and fetishistic features.

"It is easy to see this is all about desire" (18), keeps reading the poem, alluding to both the eroticism present in the image and the frustration that its observation may entail. Thus, as Burgin points out, "to look at a photograph beyond a certain period of time is to become frustrated: the image which on first looking gave pleasure by degrees becomes a veil behind which we now desire to see" (191). This frustration operates at several levels. On the one hand, coming back to the first lines of the poem, the photograph is a reminder of an irrecoverable past moment fated to eternal immobility. It does not matter for how long it is observed, how many elements may work as a trace of movement, how precisely the observer can imagine the sequence of events surrounding the captured instant; that moment will not happen again: "each time you look, it [will be] the same moment, / the hands of the clock still locked at high noon" (19-20). Paradoxically, a feeling of frustration can also be observed from the opposite angle, that is, if we consider that the captured moment belongs to a constant, never-ending cyclical stillness which, just like history, is bound to be repeated time and again. On the other hand, it does not matter how much the viewer may wish for the desired object, in this case the feminine body, to come (back) to life; that wish will never be fulfilled, she will never be "taken" . The recurrence of these elements can be connected, again, with the notion of fetishism, inasmuch as it does not differ much from Freudian interpretations: the fetish originating from a frozen moment of trauma which is only alleviated by an element related to that very traumatic moment is echoed in the photograph, understood as the frustrating proof of an irretrievable instant that can only be accessed by looking at it.

Finally, if we consider the poem within the frame of *Bellocq's Ophelia*, one more connection with fetishism can be made. Ophelia is a prostitute whose pale skin allows her to work at one of the exclusive mixed-race brothels of Storyville, as might be the case of the woman in the photograph. The high demand for those light-skinned African American women lay in the refinement their paleness purportedly conferred on them, while their "black" blood "allowed white men to play out sexual fantasies they were morally prohibited from performing with their white spouses" (Maren-Hogan 10). Arguably, the conflicting feelings of repulsion and desire towards these women transformed surreptitious "black" blood into a fetish.

The interaction with the reader/observer is introduced by the use of "perhaps," which foregrounds the viewer's role as the owner of the gaze while suggesting an accusatory tone revealing the illicit nature of that look. At the same time, the abundance of prepositions helps to accurately describe the movements of the reader's eyes throughout the photograph. The sensuality emanating from the description of the scene seems to be intended to clash with the frustration pointed out in the last lines, thus intensifying the disappointment of the observer faced with the impossibility of having the desired object. The humiliating objectification of the woman implicit in the gaze of the fetishist/voyeur is reversed with the embarrassment of the beholder's being "caught in the act."

Conclusions

The in-depth analysis of Tretheway's poetry has allowed me, in a first place, to grasp the concept of ekphrasis more fully, while overcoming some initial prejudices about it, such as the impossibility that an ekphrastic text whose visual referent is not available may be as effective as one which actually has a visual counterpart. Exploring this idea within the framework of phases outlined by Mitchell in his attempt to decode the ekphrastic process brings to light not only the power of ekphrasis to make the reader see through language regardless of the presence/absence of the visual referent, but also the understanding of the fact that the "magic" of ekphrasis lies precisely in not seeing the described image through the eyes. Furthermore, the fact that closed and open ekphrastic passages—that is, the description of a real artwork and the account of a witnessed/imagined event, respectively—, are both effectively conveyed helps us contemplate the ekphrastic process beyond the contemporary scope of the concept, linking it back to the original notion of the term in ancient times and proving the *enargeia*—that quality which moves the readers while making them feel witnesses of the depicted scene—, to be the ultimate defining feature of the ekphrastic text.

In addition, the analysis of the selected poems through figure-ground dynamics has underlined the role of parallelism and deviance, whose presence becomes a cornerstone in the successful accomplishment of the ekphrastic process in most of the analyzed poems. Whereas parallel structures draw attention to the elements the poet wants to remark, the use of semantic deviance, that is to say, metaphoric constructions, prompts the readers to look deeply into the meaning of the elements that form the analogy, leading them to the reevaluation not only of the disruptive element, but also of the described subject and the whole significance of the poem.

The different nature of painting and photography enables readers to appreciate some divergences in the way the ekphrastic process can be shaped. The fact that painting entails an entirely human-mediated process, contrary to the apparently mechanic nature of the photographic act, fosters the interaction of the poet with the elements that the author of the visual referent has intentionally left on the canvas, since each single element responds to the purpose of the painter of depicting it in that precise way. For this reason the importance of light and darkness becomes crucial in the interpretation of poems such as *"Kitchen Maid"* or *"De Espanol y Negra; Mulata,"* where the poetic voice not only makes evident the intention of the painter's deliberate use of light and darkness to portray racialized subjects in a negative way, but reverses it through the use of textual figure-ground dynamics, while bringing back to the subjects of her poems those aspects she considers have been intentionally denied from them. On the other hand, the response in Trethewey's poems to photographic images seems to be shaped not only by the aforementioned mechanical nature of the medium, but also by a theoretical approach which evidences her familiarity with key concepts in Photography Studies. Thus, some ideas such as the counterfactual dependence on reality, the proximity aspect, stillness/motion dynamics, spatio-temporal features, the concept of *punctum*, the identification of the subject with the camera position, or the voyeuristic and fetishistic connotations inherent to the medium are reflected and explored in her photography-based ekphrastic texts.

Trethewey's use of ekphrasis in the selected poems pursues the constant aim of restoring humanity and dignity to individuals who are victims of a racialized, objectified, or sexualized depiction. As a consequence, the humiliating way in which they are rendered on the canvas and the objectification implicit in their photographic portrayal become reversed, either through the sacralization of their figure and labor, or by exposing the dehumanizing impulse on the part of the artist, the beholder, or both.

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Appendix A – Poems

I. *Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus; or, The Mulata*

After the painting by Diego Velazquez, c. 1619

She is the vessels on the table before her:
the copper pot tipped toward us, the white pitcher
clutched in her hand, the black one edged in red
and upside–down. Bent over, she is the mortar,
and the pestle at rest in the mortar – still angled
in its posture of use. She is the stack of bowls
and the bulb of garlic beside it, the basket hung
by a nail on the wall and the white cloth bundled
in it, the rag in the foreground recalling her hand.
She's the stain on the wall the size of her shadow –
the color of blood, the shape of a thumb. She is echo
of Jesus at table, framed in the scene behind her:
his white corona, her white cap. Listening, she leans
into what she knows. Light falls on half her face.

II. *De Espanol y Negra; Mulata*

After the painting by Miguel Cabrera, c. 1763

What holds me first is the stemmed fruit
in the child's small hand, center
of the painting, then the word nearby: *Texocotes,*
a tiny inscription on the mother's basket –

vessel from which, the scene suggests, the fruit
has been plucked. Read: *exotic bounty*
of the new world –basket, fruit; womb, child.
And still, what looks to be

tenderness: the father caressing
his daughter's cheek, the painter's light
finding him – his profile glowing as if
lit beneath the skin. Then, the dominion

of his touch: with one hand he holds

the long stem gingerly, pressing it
against her face – his gesture at once
possessing both. Flanked by her parents,

the child, in half–light, looks out as if
toward you, her left arm disappearing
behind her mother's cloak. Such contrast how
not to see it? – in the lush depths

of paint: the mother's flat outline,
the black cloak making her blacker still,
the moon–white crescent of her eye
the only light in her face. In the foreground,

she gestures – a dark signal in the air –
her body advancing toward them
like spilled ink spreading on a page,
a great pendulum eclipsing the light.

III. *Torna Atrás*

After De Albina y Español, Nace Torna Atrás (From Albino and Spaniard, a Return–Backwards Is Born), *anonymous*, c. *1785– 1790*

The unknown artist has rendered the father a painter and so
we see him at his work: painting a portrait of his wife –
their dark child watching nearby, a servant grinding colors
in the corner. The woman poses just beyond his canvas
and cannot see her likeness, her less than mirror image
coming to life beneath his hand. He has rendered her
homely, so unlike the woman we see in this scene, dressed
in late–century fashion, a *chiqueador* – mark of beauty
in the shape of a crescent moon – affixed to her temple.
If say his painting is unfinished, that he has yet to make her
beautiful, to match the elegant sweep of her hair,
the graceful tilt of her head, has yet to adorn her dress
with lace and trim, it is only one way to see it. You might see,
instead, that the artist –perhaps to show his own skill –
has made the father a dilettante, incapable of capturing

his wife's beauty. Or, that he cannot see it: his mind's eye
reducing her to what he's made as if to reveal the illusion
immanent in her flesh. If you consider the century's mythology
of the body– that a dark spot marked the genitals of anyone
with African blood – you might see how the black moon
on her white face recalls it: the *roseta* she passes to her child
marking him *torna atrás.* If I tell you such terms were born
in the Enlightenment's hallowed rooms, that the wages of empire
is myopia, you might see the father's vision as desire embodied
in paint, this rendering of his wife born of need to see himself
as architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift
ordering his domain. And you might see why, to understand
my father, I look again and again at this painting: how it is
that a man could love – and so diminish what he loves.

IV. Three Photographs

-by Clifton Johnson, 1902

1. Daybook April 1901

What luck to find them here!
Through my lens, I watch them
strain against motion, hold still

for my shutter to open and close –
two Negro men, clothes like church,
collecting flowers in a wood,

pine needles and ivy twisting round.
I think to call it *Bouquets for Sweethearts,*
a blessing though their faces

hold little emotion. And yet,
they make such good subjects.
Always easy to pose,

their childlike curiosity.
How well this arbor frames
my shot—an intimate setting,

the boughs nestling us
like brothers. How fortunate still
to have found them here

instead of farther along
by that old cemetery
too full with new graves

and no flowers.

2. Cabbage Vendor

Natural, he say.
What he want from me?
Say he gone look through that hole –
his spirit box –
and watch me sell my cabbages
to make a picture
hold this moment, forever.
Nothing natural last
forever. When I'm in my garden
tearing these cabbages
from earth, hearing them scream
at the break, my fingers
brown as dirt—that's natural.
Or when I be in my kitchen
frying up salt pork
to cook that cabbage,
them meeting in the pot
like kin—that's natural.
Grown cabbage and cook cabbage
don't keep. Even dead
don't keep same.
But he will keep my picture,
unnatural like hoodoo love.
I could work a root of my own,
turn that thing around
and make him see himself

like he be seeing me—distant
and small—forever.

3. Wash Women

The eyes of eight women
I don't know
stare out from this photograph
saying *remember*.
Hung against these white walls,
their dark faces, common
as ones I've known,
stand out like some distant Monday
I've only heard about.
I picture wash day:
red beans simmering on the stove,
a number three tin tub
on the floor, well-water ready
to boil. There's cook-starch
for ironing, and some
left over to eat.

I hear the laughter,
three sisters speaking
of penny drinks, streetcars,
the movie house. A woman
like my grandmother rubs linens
against the washboard ribs,
hymns growing in her throat.
By the window, another
soaks crocheted lace, then presses
each delicate roll, long fingers
wet and glistening.
And in the doorway, the eldest
shifts her milk-heavy breasts,
a pile of strangers' clothes,
soiled, at her feet.

But in his photograph,

women do not smile,
their lips a steady line
connecting each quiet face.
They walk the road toward home,
a week's worth of take-in laundry
balanced on their heads
lightly as church hats. Shaded
by their loads, they do not squint,
their ready gaze through him,
to me, straight ahead.

V. Photograph of a Bawd Drinking Raleigh Rye

-E. J Bellocq, circa 1912

The glass in her hand is the only thing moving too
fast for the camera—caught in the blur of motion.
She raises it toasting, perhaps, the viewer you become
taking her in—your eyes starting low, at her feet,
and following those striped stockings like roads,
traveling the length of her calves and thighs. Up then,
to the fringed scarf draping her breasts, the heart
locket, her bare shoulder and the patch of dark hair
beneath her arm, the round innocence of her cheeks
and Gibson-girl hair. Then over to the trinkets on the table
beside her: a clock; tiny feather-backed rocking chairs
poised to move with the slightest wind or breath;
the ebony statuette of a woman, her arms stretched above
her head. Even the bottle of rye is a woman's slender torso
and round hips. On the wall behind her, the image again -
women in paintings, in photographs, and carved in relief
on an oval plane. And there, on the surface of it all, a thumbprint—
perhaps yours? It's easy to see this is all about desire,
how it recurs—each time you look, it's the same moment,
the hands of the clock still locked at high noon.

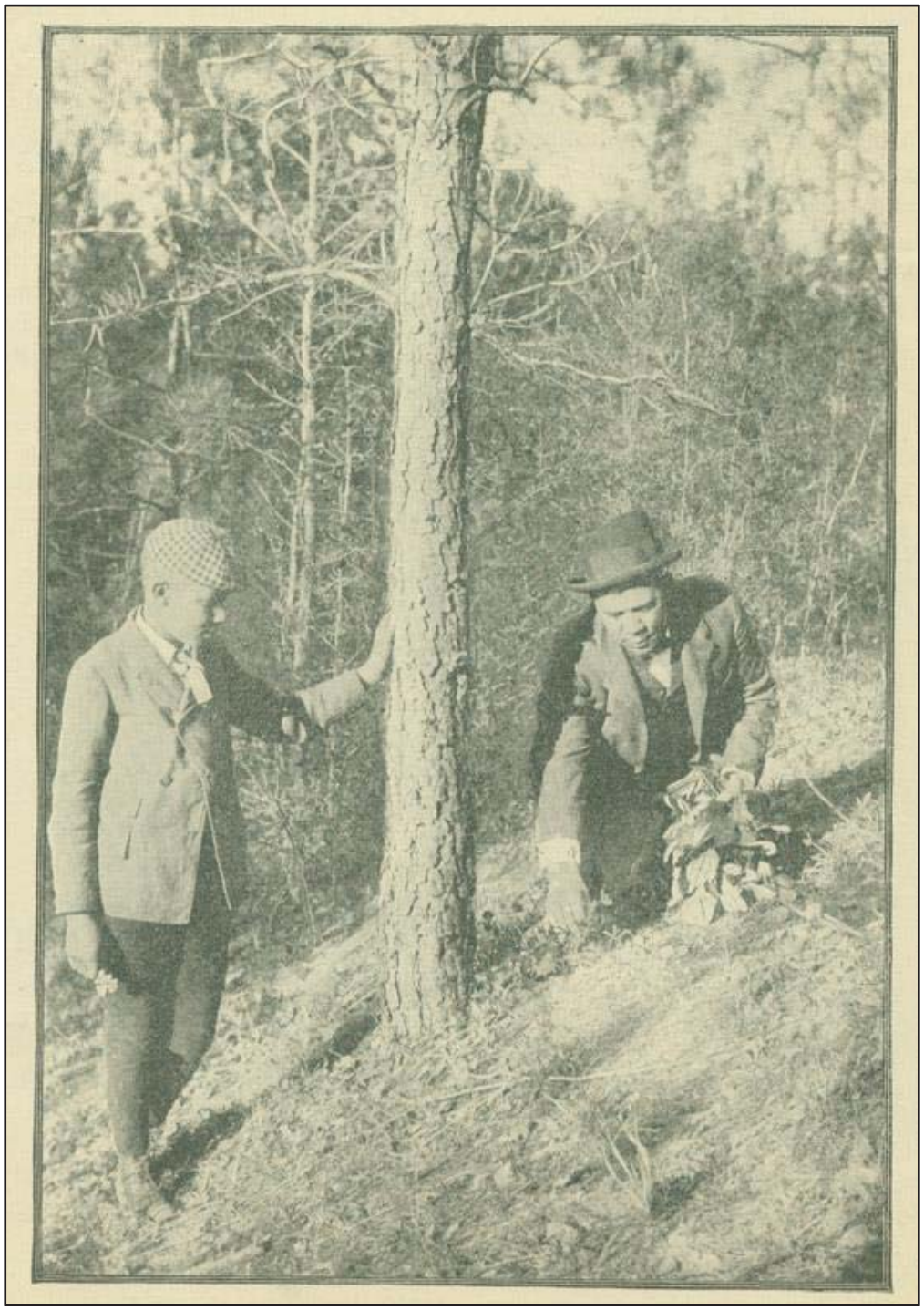
Appendix B – Figures

I. Figure 1:

II. Figure 2:

III. Figure 3:

IV. Figure 4:



V. Figure 5:

VI. Figure 6: